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Undiagnosing Iphis: How the Lack of Trauma in John Gower's "Iphis And Iante" Reinforces a Subversive Trans Narrative

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Undiagnosing Iphis: How the Lack of Trauma in John Gower's "Iphis and Ianthe" Reinforces a Subversive Trans Narrative

The Roman poet Ovid's tale of "Iphis and Ianthe" has gone through multiple medieval renditions connected by the narrative thread of a father who threatens to kill his child if she is born a girl, but the mother disguises her "daughter" Iphis as a son. Years later, Iphis falls in love with the maiden Ianthe and then is magically transformed into a "man" just before his marriage. Many scholars understand this transformation as an expression of compulsory heterosexuality¹ facilitated by traumatic patriarchal expectations.² Trauma has long played a role in queer narratives, which is why I am interested in John Gower's medieval rendition of "Iphis and Ianthe" in which he edits out Iphis's self-loathing monologues and allows her to live a life with minimal trauma.³ Gower's version in his *Confessio Amantis* does not switch between masculine and feminine pronouns either, but solely uses masculine pronouns to refer to Iphis. His strategic changes to the tale allow it to remain a queer narrative throughout. Instead of being a tale of lesbianism erased by heteronormativity, Gower's tale can be read as a subversive trans narrative that revolts against cisnormative conceptions of transness, an interpretation that I will discuss alongside another trans reading of Iphis by M.W. Bychowski.⁴ Ultimately, Gower's "Iphis and

¹ Jonathan Walker, "Before the Name: Ovid's Deformulated Lesbianism," *Comparative Literature* 58, no. 3 (2006): 205-22. Accessed April 1, 2019. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4125343>.

² William Robins, "Three Tales of Female Same-Sex Marriage: Ovid's 'Iphis and Ianthe,' the Old French *Yde et Olive*, and Antonio Pucci's *Reina d'Oriente*," *Exemplaria* 21, no. 1 (2009): 43-62. Accessed April 1, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1179/175330709X372012>, 46.

³ Sara Ahmed, "Unhappy Queers," in *The Promise of Happiness*, 88-120 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 88-89.

⁴ M. W. Bychowski, "Unconfessing Transgender: Dysphoric Youths and the Medicalization of Madness in John Gower's 'Tale of Iphis and Ianthe,'" *Accessus: A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media* 3, no. 1 (2016): article 3. Accessed April 1, 2019. <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol3/iss1/3>.

Iante,” compared to Ovid’s, challenges the role of trauma in shaping not only queer identity, but specifically trans identity.

The *lack* of trauma in Gower’s “Iphis and Iante” is what specifically makes the tale possible to interpret as a trans narrative, rather than an erasure of lesbian identity. This is because Ovid’s original, trauma-filled tale reinforces conceptions of queer unhappiness and muddles the desires of the characters, conflating Iphis’s love for Ianthe with needing to relieve her shame. Ovid’s tale is focused on the desire *for* Ianthe and the trauma associated with that same-sex attraction, rather than the desire *to be* a man. The conflict of the narrative circles around the desires and relationship between two characters—as illustrated by Iphis’s monologues. In the following lines, Iphis laments her love for Ianthe:

How wild a passion works within my breast ...
 Crete fam’d for monsters, wanted of her store,
 ‘Till my new love produc’d one monster more.
 The daughter of the sun a bull desir’d,
 And yet ev’n then a male a female fir’d:
 Her passion was extravagantly new,
 But mine is much the madder of the two.⁵

The focus and mythological comparison is about desire. The “wild a passion” and “new love” is what Iphis views as monstrous—a description used by many others throughout history, including Gloria Anzaldúa’s subversion of this trope when she embraces the “Shadow-Beast”⁶ that stalks

⁵ Ovid, “The Fable of Iphis and Ianthe,” *Metamorphoses*, trans. Sir Samuel Garth, John Dryden, et al., *The Internet Classics Archive*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.9.ninth.html>, 91, lines 106-12.

⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 42.

the borders of marginal identities. Iphis's is a queer desire, but one that's tempered by a heteronormative society, because all other unions are "mad" and produce "monsters." Iphis's strife focuses on the potential union, and she makes a mythological comparison between herself and Pasiphaë, who desired a bull—an unnatural union—but in Iphis's eyes, Pasiphaë and the bull are more legitimate because the circumstances were heterosexual. Notably, Iphis categorizes her desire as "madder," a descriptor historically attributed to women. Since the Socratic philosophers, the ability to reason is masculine, while irrationality and madness is connected to women.⁷ It can be considered a form of "madness" for a woman not to desire a man, particularly in a society imbued with patriarchal mythology of Jupiter and his consorts, a father willing to commit infanticide, and one in which Iphis herself cannot conceptualize non-heterosexual desire as anything but "monstrous."

But how do we read the Ovidian Iphis's wish to be with Ianthe regardless of her own gender, rather than as a man who desires Ianthe? This is where trauma and desire become intertwined and Ovidian Iphis's desire to become male is coerced, rather than a reflection of Iphis's internal identity. For Ovid's Iphis, gender becomes a vehicle to act on desire. In her monologue, she asks, "What art can make me able to enjoy [Ianthe] / Or what can change Ianthe to a boy?"⁸ In these lines, Iphis does not care who "is the man" in the relationship, so to speak; she is motivated by her love for Ianthe. She wants to enjoy her, not as a man, but as a woman. Thus, her first thought is to ask, "what can change Ianthe to a boy?" even though it has been Iphis who has spent her whole life presenting as the son her father desired.

⁷ Genevieve Lloyd, "Reason, Science, and the Domination of Matter," in *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1-2.

⁸ Ovid, "The Fable of Iphis and Ianthe," 119-120.

In identifying Iphis's same-sex love, William Robins raises the question not only of desire, but whose desires are being fulfilled. Robins writes, "This part of the story [the transformation] is generally read as a wish-fulfillment, but we should be clear whose wishes are being fulfilled. It is not just the erotic longings of the young lovers that are satisfied by this change, but also the demand of the cruel father that he have a son and not a daughter."⁹ Robins challenges the audience to question the roots of desire in the piece. Although Robins never mentions in his article the possibility of "Iphis and Ianthe" being a trans narrative, his interpretation confirms that while Ovid's Iphis prays to Isis to become a man, that's not her primary desire—but rather a means to love Ianthe intelligibly per the heterosexual norms she knows. Iphis's prayer to Isis is the result of building social pressures and others' desires: the first desire of Lygdus, the father, to have a son; the mother's desire for her child to live and not be discovered; Iphis's desire for Ianthe; and Ianthe's desire to wed the person she knows as a man.

Ovid's tale is difficult to read as a trans narrative because it is so steeped in conflicting desires that arise from conflicting traumas—the threat of infanticide, the threat of becoming monstrous, the threat of revelation on the wedding night. John Gower's alterations to the Ovidian tale make it possible for contemporary scholars to read the text as a trans narrative while keeping in mind that the goal of queer theory lenses is not to label characters but to analyze the social and historical forces and cues that encourage queer readings. A major difference is in the relationship between identity and body in the Ovidian and Gowerian tales. In Ovid's tale, gender is constructed first and foremost through the body and brings social harmony. In Gower's text, gender is an internal part of one's nature—it solidifies the harmony that already exists. This is visible in the use of pronouns and gendered descriptions during the final transformation in both

⁹ William Robins, "Three Tales of Female Same-Sex Marriage," 50.

narratives. Ovid does not use gendered pronouns in the original Latin, but John Dryden's translation is a gendered interpretation of Ovid's text as Dryden attempts to bring Ovid's intentions across through English. In Dryden's translation, Iphis only uses masculine pronouns only once at the very end of the tale and even maintains feminine pronouns while in the liminal space of transformation: "*Her* sparkling eyes with *manly* vigour shone, / Big was *her* voice, audacious was *her* tone [emphasis added]."¹⁰ This liminality is undeniably queer, but also suggests that in Dryden's linguistic interpretation of Ovid, manhood and gender hinge on "completeness" for Ovid and that women are only "incomplete" men, per Aristotelian philosophy.¹¹ Ovid's Iphis must become "complete," the balance between her masculine role and her feminine body must meet at the point of he/him/his by the end of the tale.

Gower's version does not navigate this "incompleteness." Gowerian Iphis's transformation, textually, does not move from a specified gender to another, but functions rather as a confirmation of Iphis's masculine identity. From the first time Gower refers to Iphis, he writes,

Whan sche [Iphis's mother] delivered scholde be,
 Isis be nyhte in priveté,
 Which of childinge is the goddesse,
 Cam for to helpe in that destresse,
 Til that this lady was al smal,

¹⁰ Ovid, "The Fable of Iphis and Ianthe," 196-97.

¹¹ Charlotte Witt and Lisa Shapiro, "Feminist History of Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Accessed April 14, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/feminism-femhist/>.

And hadde a dowhter forthwithal;
 Which the goddesse in alle weie
 Bad kepe, and that thei scholden seie
It were a sone: and thus Iphis
 Thei namede *him*, and upon this
 The fader was mad so to wene.”¹²

Gower’s use of masculine pronouns for Iphis is clear enough, but the poet also creates an interesting tension that constructs Iphis’s gender as male with the enjambment. He breaks the line after “thei scholden seie” and the following statement stands as a speech act: “It were a sone: and thus Iphis.” This line creates a tension between the original Ovidian tale and Gower’s version. Iphis’s name and identity are not technicalities or half-truths for Gower. Gower’s straightforward claim of “It were a sone” contrasts strongly with the naming of *Ovid*’s Iphis in which the “truth was cover’d with a pious cheat,”¹³ showing that the Ovidian Iphis’s gender is a concealment or a lie.

Therefore, Gower’s Iphis is born a son, accepted as a son, and in the end, his core identity becomes confirmed. Gowerian Iphis’s emotions are not muddled by trauma, and Iphis’s love for Ianthe exists *alongside* the uncoerced desire to live and love *as a man*, rather than wishing to live and love *heterosexually*. In the transformation scene, Gower writes,

“That he [Cupide] acordant to nature,
 Whan that he syth the time best,

¹² John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 2, 2nd edition, Middle English Texts Series, ed. Russell A. Peck (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), 4. 459-569. <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-book-4#iphis>.

¹³ Ovid, “The Fable of Iphis and Ianthe,” 65.

That ech of hem [Iphis and Iante] hath other kest,
 Transformeth Iphe into a man.”¹⁴

Cupide, like Isis, waits to transform Iphis. The difference is, Gower’s Iphis is able to kiss Ianthe without spiraling into a monologue of shame and does not have to feel torn between loving Ianthe and needing one of them to change to fit the heterosexual model. He is not a woman kissing another woman—he is a man kissing a woman. Iphis is already, “accordant to nature,” a man. That line could be interpreted in multiple ways, such as “accordant to [the laws of] nature” suggesting Cupide changed Iphis to conform to a heterocentric understanding of “nature,” or the ambiguous line could be read as “accordant to [his, Iphis’s] nature,” suggesting a trans identity that’s not only internal and social but also is “physical” as well by the end of the tale.

Mine is not the first trans interpretation of “Iphis and Iante”; however, I diverge from existing interpretations in my analysis of Iphis’s trauma—or lack thereof—in Gower. M. W. Bychowski’s queer interpretation in her article “Unconfessing Transgender” identifies “Iphis and Iante” as a trans narrative, but she claims that vocalized trauma is *necessary* to the formation of Iphis’s trans identity in the form of gender dysphoria.¹⁵ As established earlier, I do not view Ovidian Iphis’s trauma as functioning as gender dysphoria, rather as a social pressure to conform to the heterocentric desires of her family, while Gower’s Iphis is more likely to be read as trans. I disagree with Bychowski’s claims that 1) a speech act in the form of dysphoria is necessary to properly “diagnose” Gowerian Iphis¹⁶ and 2) that without this verbalized dysphoria, Gowerian

¹⁴ Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 4. 498-502.

¹⁵ M. W. Bychowski, “Unconfessing Transgender,” 6, 29-31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

Iphis is without agency.¹⁷ Instead, I understand the lack of trauma and dysphoria as showing the agency by not conforming to ciscentric diagnostic models.

In her article, Bychowski parallels Ovidian Iphis's shameful monologue with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* fifth edition's definition of gender dysphoria and creates a parallel with Judith Butler's writing on gender identity disorder (GID), a term that was used in earlier versions of the *DSM*. Using this parallel in conjunction with Judith Butler's texts, Bychowski claims that the *DSM* can explain why Gower's Iphis is stripped of agency as a trans child. She writes, "The *DSM* begins by tying agency with the ability to speak. Diagnosis is dependent on the youth being able to verbalize his or her gender In Gower, Iphis does not openly speak at all."¹⁸ Bychowski takes the claim of the *DSM*: that in order to be diagnosed, a child must "verbalize his or her gender" as a show of agency and then applies that logic to Iphis. However, considering that Bychowski grounds her use of the *DSM* within Judith Butler's commentary on the diagnostic manual, her reading and use of Butler do not adequately reflect the nuance and changing attitudes surrounding the *DSM* for diagnosing gender dysphoria or GID, depending on the version of the *DSM*. From a queer theory perspective, Bychowski's claim that Gower's Iphis lacks agency due to a lack of visible gender dysphoria (i.e., discomfort in one's assigned gender) falls short.

The problem with simplifying agency to a speech act of declaring one's gender is that the *DSM* has a history of coercing queer people into speech acts and stereotypical gender performances in exchange for otherwise inaccessible medical care or legal recognition.¹⁹ Can a

¹⁷ Ibid., 29-31.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11-12.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 57-101.

speech act truly denote agency if it is coerced, or if resources are being withheld in exchange for a gendered performance? Judith Butler complicates the role of diagnosis in her collection, *Undoing Gender*, as she grapples with the idea that trans agency is sometimes both resisting *and* conforming to the “regulatory apparatus”²⁰ that is the *DSM*. Butler writes:

The diagnosis [of Gender Identity Disorder] makes many assumptions that undercut trans autonomy. It subscribes to forms of psychological assessment which assume that the diagnosed person is affected by forces he or she does not understand. It assumes that there is delusion or dysphoria in such people. It assumes that certain gender norms have not been properly embodied, and that an error and a failure have taken place. It makes assumptions about fathers and mothers, and what normal family life is, and should have been. It assumes the language of correction, adaptation, and normalization. It seeks to uphold the gender norms of the world as it is currently constituted and tends to pathologize any effort to produce gender in ways that fail to conform to existing norms.²¹

Butler writes about how trans identity gets diagnosed within a ciscentric framework, thus making it more difficult for trans people to express their agency outside of (or even within) these diagnostic parameters. Under the guise of “protecting” trans people from making their own medical decisions about their bodies, doctors “assume that the diagnosed person is affected by forces he or she does

²⁰ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 90-1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

not understand.”²² By the *DSM*’s logic, only a doctor, through careful evaluation, can officially decide if a person actually “knows” they are trans or not. The *DSM* creates legal and medical hurdles for trans people to “prove” that they are “trans enough” to transition. Within the confines of the *DSM*, a trans person is assumed not to have adequate self-reflective abilities or self-knowledge.

Knowledge becomes limited to action and performance, instead of being informed by perception, reflection, and experience. The system of the *DSM* assumes definite knowledge of gender done “correctly,” and enforces those norms on people who need the diagnosis to be able to transition legally and financially if they want to. It assumes, as Butler writes, “the language of correction, adaptation, and normalization.”²³ Thus, to “diagnose” Iphis within the framework of the *DSM*, to require speech acts that perform the stereotypical narrative of tragic transness *does not* function within a queer theoretical framework. Gower’s Iphis, if anything, is subversive by queering the narrative without embodying the trauma and performance required of trans people by the *DSM* (recognizing that outside of a medieval tale, performing of gender and gender dysphoria can be a trans person’s only point of access to medical care).

Iphis does not need to “embrace and nurture” his dysphoria in order to be read as trans or seen as having agency.²⁴ However, Bychowski claims that by not being able to voice his dysphoria, Gower’s Iphis may even be transformed against his express will, akin to a child having corrective surgery without consent.²⁵ This raises the question: what does it mean to listen to and read queer voices in literature? What does it mean for them to have agency? Bychowski

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Bychowski, “Unconfessing Transgender,” 36.

²⁵ Ibid.

believes the answer is in listening to the literal voices and monologues. She leaves the reader with the question: “Will you be like Eros [Cupide] who swoops in to solve individual problems *without being asked*, or like Isis who embraces and nurtures dysphoria? [emphasis added]”²⁶ Bychowski frames Cupide’s role in “Iphis and Iante” as being a savior narrative or an obtrusive “Ally” speaking over those in a marginalized community. Yes, Cupide could be read in this way. After all, in Ovid’s “Iphis and Ianthe” Isis only comes when Iphis prays to her directly, asking for her aid. However, Gower’s Cupide, as stated before, transforms Iphis “acordant to nature, / Whan that he syh the time best, / That ech of hem hath other kest.”²⁷ Earlier, I discussed the ambiguity of nature—natural “laws” or Iphis’s nature? If reading nature as Iphis’s gender, then Cupide transforms him according to his (Iphis’s) own nature.

Importantly, Cupide waits until “the time best,” beginning in early adolescence, a time when Iphis is presumed to be autonomous enough to be betrothed and fall in love with Ianthe, but still before puberty, when many trans children would ask to start using puberty blockers or might want to start hormone replacement therapy.²⁸ Iphis does not have to beg the gods (doctors) for help, convince them (having to *prove* his gender and nature), or even feel traumatized by his love for Ianthe. He lives his life as male and as he approaches puberty, the gods see that his nature is masculine and he begins the next part of his life as Ianthe’s husband. In this reading, Gowerian Iphis retains agency in his identity throughout the tale, supported by his lack of trauma. Ultimately, Gower’s Iphis is subversive because trauma does not legitimize his identity as a trans child.

²⁶ Ibid., 36.

²⁷ Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 4. 498-500.

²⁸ Priyanka Boghani, “When Transgender Kids Transition, Medical Risks are Both Known and Unknown,” *Frontline*. Accessed April 19, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/when-transgender-kids-transition-medical-risks-are-both-known-and-unknown/>.

Gower's Iphis creates a subversive trans narrative that doesn't require a performance of dysphoria nor does he have "symptoms" of transness that must be medicalized or "corrected." By comparing Gower's and Ovid's versions of "Iphis and Ianthe" through a queer lens, we engage in a reception theory of reading texts—how understandings of queer texts change over generations, from Ovid's original readership, to Gower's medieval revisions, to our own academic debates about Iphis as a man or a woman, depending on the version at hand. Richard E. Zeikowitz explains the pedagogical goals of queer medieval readings well: "[it's not about] how to identify medieval precursors of gay or lesbian people; rather, ... to view critical depictions of queerness ... by employing a pedagogy of questioning: What is queer about a particular character? ... How is queerness an unstable cultural construction?"²⁹ In the 1990s and early 2000s, the majority of the scholarship on Iphis focused on her as a lesbian. Now, in the late 2010s, interpretations of him as a trans man are emerging and the way we're talking about queerness and the demedicalization of gender has vastly changed as well. Revisiting medieval narratives like the tale of "Iphis and Iante" not only brings new insight and the possibility for new interpretation into the original text, but also shows us how we are changing as readers, as academics, and as a society.

²⁹ Richard E. Zeikowitz, "Befriending the Medieval Queer: A Pedagogy for Literature Classes," *College English* 65, no. 1 (2002): 67-80. Accessed April 1, 2019. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3250731>, 70.

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